

PRECISION ENGAGEMENT



Tech. Sgt. Joseph Napolitano scans the ground from inside an HH-60 Pave Hawk during a National Guard Bureau Joint Quarterly Training Exercise at Fort Benning, Ga. Sergeant Napolitano is assigned to the 101st Rescue Squadron, New York.



SPECIAL TACTICS AIRMEN SERVE AS LIAISON BETWEEN MEN AND MACHINES

STORY BY TECH. SGT. MATTHEW BATES • PHOTOS BY STAFF. SGT. DESIREE PALACIOS

MENTION THE TERM “AIR STRIKE” THESE DAYS AND A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT PLAYING “CALL OF DUTY,” A POPULAR COMBAT-STYLE VIDEO GAME. IN THE GAME, PLAYERS **CALL IN** VIRTUAL AIR STRIKES ON THEIR OPPONENTS AS A REWARD FOR EARNING A CERTAIN NUMBER OF **KILLS**.

But for Staff Sgt. Kenneth Walker, there’s nothing pretend about it. Calling in air strikes is what he does for a living.

He’s a tactical air control party member with the 116th Air Support Operations Squadron, an Air National Guard unit out of Camp Murray, Wash. TACPs are specialists that advise ground forces on aircraft employment and capabilities and direct combat aircraft onto enemy targets. They typically work in teams of two and deploy with Army combat units.

“Basically, we’re the liaison between ground forces and aircraft,” Sergeant Walker said. “We communicate with the infantry guys and the guys in the air to get bombs on target where they’re needed.”

This might sound routine, but it’s not. Being a TACP means being a highly trained, highly skilled Airman who is adaptive, quick on his feet and great at multi-tasking. Just to become a TACP and earn the coveted black beret, Airmen must pass an initial skills course, a combat survival course, a basic parachutist course

and an advanced special tactics course. In all, this is 32 weeks of rigorous, down-and-dirty training.

“It’s definitely a lot,” Sergeant Walker said. “But it’s all stuff we need to know when we’re out there doing this for real.”

When TACPs aren’t deployed and doing their job for real, they participate in exercises to practice their skills and stay certified in required tasks. The latest was the National Guard Bureau’s Joint Quarterly Training Exercise at Fort Stewart, Ga. Here, TACPs from the 116th ASOS practiced working with Army infantry units and calling in close-air support aircraft, ranging from A-10 Thunderbolt IIs to F-18 Hornets and HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters.

“It’s great to work with real aircraft and see live rounds hitting targets,” said Tech. Sgt. Benjamin Santiago, a TACP with the 116th ASOS. “Simulations are fine, but the real thing is always better.”

But the exercise doesn’t just give the TACPs some valuable hands-on training; it also lets them check a very important box.

“We have requirements to control aircraft every 90 days and direct the release of ordnance every 180 days to stay current on our certifications,” Sergeant Santiago said.

Senior Airman
Benjamin Hale, Staff
Sgt. Cory Welton
and Staff Sgt. Jacob
Torgerson speak to
the pilot of an A-10
Thunderbolt during
the training exercise
at Camp Townsend,
Ga.





Tech. Sgt. Lionel
Gillis scans the area
during an exercise
at Fort Benning, Ga.
Sergeant Gillis is a
joint terminal attack
controller based out of
Camp Murray, Wash.

YOU SPEND A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER AND LEARN TO RELY ON EACH OTHER.

— Tech. Sgt. Benjamin Santiago

Sergeant Gillis conducts a radio check during the National Guard Bureau's Joint Quarterly Training Exercise.

An A-10 Thunderbolt flies overhead during the exercise at Camp Townsend, Ga.

"Participating in exercises like this lets us meet those requirements."

And meeting these requirements is often difficult. Being a Guard unit, Airmen assigned to the 116th ASOS must balance the demands of their day-to-day civilian jobs with those of the military.

"We have to meet the same requirements as our active duty counterparts, but we're doing it part time," Sergeant Walker said. "So we only get half the time to do what the active-duty guys are doing, and that is challenging at times."

There are deployments, too. TACPs are in high demand in Afghanistan, and 116th ASOS schedulers are routinely sending tactical air controllers over there.

"We've got some guys slated to go here soon, so we'll make sure they get priority when it comes to staying certified," Sergeant Santiago said. "And the training will pay off over there, too."

These men know what they're talking about. In one six month period in 2009, Sergeant Walker's three-man team called in more than 300,000 pounds of bombs in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan.

"It was about a battle every day," he said. "Sometimes two or three a day."

Sergeant Walker attributed the team's success to the rigorous, in-depth training it received prior to leaving: slogging through mud, spending nights in the rain and getting bombs and bullets on target.

"When things start happening for real, you just react and do your job," he



said. "But then you sit back and think, 'Man, I'm glad I went through the suck in training so I was prepared here.'"

To be a TACP means to be versatile, too. They are Air Force elements, but spend the majority of their time working with the Army and other services.

"So not only are we highly trained specialists, but we have the joint aspect to our mission that is also pretty unique," Sergeant Santiago said. "But it's a good relationship ... we help them and they help us."

Another good relationship is the one they have with each other. Being a special tactics unit, TACPs are a close-knit, "get-each-other's-back" kind of team. This is due, in large part, to the nature of the business.

"You spend a lot of time together and learn to rely on each other," Sergeant Santiago said. "And the stresses of the job really bring you together so we're almost like some kind of crazy, dysfunctional family."

Still, the TACPs wouldn't have it any other way.

"It's one of the draws to [being a TACP] and one of the reasons I am one," Sergeant Walker said. "You develop some strong relationships and great friendships here that you miss when you leave."

So, while the average TACP might not be very good at playing video games like "Call of Duty," he is good at keeping real Soldiers safe by calling in very real, and very deadly, precision air strikes. 🦅



Senior Airman

Benjamin Hale scans the exercise area using a range finder.

Airman Hale is a joint terminal attack controller based out of Camp Murray, Wash.